1-1-2002

Dance in Iran

Anthony Shay
Pomona College

Dance in Iran

Anthony Shay

Dance in an Islamic Context
Regional Folk Dances
Solo Improvised Dance

As one of the world's oldest and most enduring cultural, linguistic, and political entities, Iran has for centuries provided settings for dance. Iconographic evidence of dance is seen on pottery dated as early as 5000 B.C.E. (Zokā'1978–1979). Choreographic activity has been documented mainly in observations by foreigners, from antiquity to our own time, and in artworks such as prehistoric pottery, silver work from the Sasanian period (224–650 C.E.), and miniatures from the twelfth century on. Since there is in general a paucity of documentation, it is impossible to reconstruct the dance of any historical period exactly. However, some observers have speculated about this (De Warren and Williams 1973, Rezvani 1962), and the historical evidence indicates cultural continuity in both group and solo dance forms.

Iran is, and most likely has always been, a region of immense ethnic and linguistic diversity, open to influences from many cultures, and its dance traditions reflect this diversity. In this article, the term *Iranian* encompasses the cultural and aesthetic expression of a wide region, which is also the area covered by literary and art histories of Iran: the Caucasus, Iran, Afghanistan, and Muslim areas in the former Soviet Union such as Uzbekistan and Tajikistan—in other words, an area much greater than the contemporary nation-state of Iran.

Two basic types of dance are performed in this Iranian cultural sphere, and in the Middle East generally. The first is regional folk dancing, most often (but not exclusively) performed in groups. The second is solo improvised dance (sometimes referred to as *majlesī* 'social' or 'party'). This second form often evokes a strongly negative reaction, reflected, now as in the past, in attempts to ban public performances of solo improvised dance and to marginalize professional performers. People in this area of the world sometimes seem to have what I call a "choreophobic" mentality; yet the same people who might condemn a solo performance in one context will happily perform a solo dance in another context—for example, at a wedding—and despite political bans in both Iran and Afghanistan, people will put themselves at risk of severe penalties to perform solo dances at weddings. Evidently, then, solo improvised dance is an ambiguous symbol in Iranian society, powerful but at the same time highly negative. It is nonetheless loved, performed, and frequently staged—at present in the United States and formerly throughout the Iranian cultural sphere.

Most Muslims view dance as the least of the arts, if indeed they consider it an art form at all.

DANCE IN AN ISLAMIC CONTEXT

Every researcher of dance or music in North Africa, the Middle East, or Central Asia soon confronts the fact that music and especially dance are often regarded with ambivalence and even hostility. Most Muslims view dance as the least of the arts, if indeed they consider it an art form at all. Many writers attribute this negative view of dance to Islam, but often without citing any supporting evidence. The historian Albert Hourani's thoughtful explanation (1991) of the care with which medieval Muslim scholars discussed the propriety of music and dance has not been sufficiently heeded by modern scholars, who tend to oversimplify this crucial issue. Thus we find claims such as Metin And's comment that "the austerity and rigidity of Islam did much to discourage music and dance and waged a relentless war against them" (1959:13) and the ethnomusicologist Hormoz Farhat's statement, "At the outset, Islamic religious leaders had assumed a hostile attitude towards music, and regarded it as a corrupting frivolity" (1990:4). One noted specialist in ethnic dance, La Meri, observed incorrectly that "Mohammed himself banned music and dance, and the arts withered" (adding, though, "But somehow they managed to keep alive"; 1961:44).

Although some members of the *'ulemā'*, including Ayatollāh Rūhollāh Khomeinī, have anathematized dance and attempted to ban public performances, Muslims' attitudes toward dance and music are more complex and diverse than And, Farhat, and La Meri would have us believe. If the Prophet Muhammad had indeed explicitly forbidden music and dance, or if there were a clear statement to that effect in the Qur'ān, the issue would have been resolved long ago, and these performing arts would not exist in the Islamic world.

Dancing and dance events in "choreophobic" societies such as many Islamic areas of North Africa, the Middle East, and Central Asia have received little scholarly attention, though this is changing. Some writers have extended the category of dance in an Islamic context to include spiritual practices and martial arts that incorporate patterned rhythmic movement. Iranians almost universally state that dance is found only on happy occasions; by contrast, spiritual or religious contexts are generally serious and often commemorate tragic events such as Ḥosein's martyrdom at Karbalā', calling forth deep grief among the participants. This raises the issue of which patterned movements actually constitute dance in an Islamic context and which do not. In my view, whether an activity should be characterized as dance can be determined by the intention of the participants and their audiences. In the words of Bousseloub, "When a Muslim performs ablutions and prepares himself to pray, he mentally announces his intention to pray and to address God. . . . Intention is everything, and must be followed by action. Clearly, their intent is to use turning to communicate with God, not to dance. The word dance cannot be used in religious or holy terms, except perhaps in quotation marks" (interview, 12 February 1993).

Such terms as *whirling dervishes* or *dancing dervishes* and *Sufi dancing* need to be reexamined; we should hesitate before subsuming group movements of a spiritual nature under the rubric *dance*. For many Shi'a men living in urban centers in the

Iranian cultural sphere, coordinated movements performed by groups (such as those found in *'azādārī*, the *zūr-khāne*, *zekr*, and other Sufi activities) largely replace dance. Because of the religious and spiritual fervor associated with these activities, they are often more popular than dance as forms of group expression.

REGIONAL FOLK DANCES

The northern and western regions of the Iranian cultural sphere, including Georgia, Armenia, Daghestan, Azerbaijan, Kurdistan, and Lorestan, are the eastern terminus of a choreographic "belt" which begins in Europe and in which patterned line, circle, and semicircle dances constitute the most common form of choreographic expression (for descriptions of dances, see Hasanov 1988; Lisitsian 1956–1972). In the folk dances of this Iranian region, the dancers are often linked by hand-holding of various sorts. The leader often executes special figures and gestures with his or her hand, in which a kerchief is held, to signal changes in foot patterns, in movements, or in the direction in which the group is moving.

By contrast, in the eastern and southern parts of the Iranian sphere—such as Khorasan, Fars, the Persian Gulf region, Baluchistan, Afghanistan, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, and Tajikistan—although regional dances are also performed in groups, the dancers do not touch one another. These dancers often carry scarves, sticks, or other objects with which to emphasize their movements. Here, some scope for improvisation is possible because of the relative freedom of each dancer's body; however, the dancers still conceive of themselves as part of a group, moving together (for descriptions of dances, see Hamada 1978; St. John 1993).

All these dances are usually associated with the countryside, though they may sometimes be seen in urban areas, particularly the line and circle dances. Because such a dance involves numerous participants, it is commonly performed outdoors. The dances are characterized by regional styles and—unlike solo improvised dance—by short patterned choreographic phrases that are repeated and embellished with variations.

Regional dances (such as the examples in figures 1 and 2), particularly those performed in lines and circles, may be seen at various events in southern California and other parts of the United States that have large communities of Azerbaijanis, Kurds, Assyrians, and Armenians who gather for communal celebrations.

FIGURE 1 Rice harvest dance from the village of Qāsemābad, Gilan Province. Avaz, Anthony Shay's International Dance Theatre; photo by Darren Young, 1995.

SOLO IMPROVISED DANCE

Whereas the specifically regional dance forms are usually performed in village and tribal areas, solo improvised dancing is frequently associated with urban life. In contrast to the regional dances, this dance form is performed in a highly individual and idiosyncratic style, though in a strikingly uniform manner with respect to performance and the underlying aesthetic and creative impulses. Such dancing can be seen from Tiflis in Georgia to western China, from Khiva in Uzbekistan to Shīrāz in southwestern Iran, and in the Iranian diaspora, especially in southern California. In this dance form, within the specific stylistic framework improvisational creativity is potentially limitless. The folk, classical, professional, and social dancing of the urban population is of this type. This dance tradition is both domestic and professional; it is a part of comic improvised theater (*rū-ḥowżī*, *sīyāh-bāzī*) and also of women's domestic theater (*bāzī-hā-ye nemāyeshī*; see Bezā'ī 1965; Shay 1995a).

Solo improvised dance draws from a large, rich reservoir of movement practices. During the course of such dances, highly experienced performers, both professional and amateur, use the shoulders, hips, torso, and head, and even nuanced movements of the lips and eyebrows; in fact, movements of the torso and the facial features offer the greatest aesthetic and "transgressive" potential. The use of eyebrows and other facial features is an unusual choreographic feature, which makes this dance form unique in the Middle East. Beautiful, intricate hand and arm movements are also highly prized in Iranian solo improvised dance, both domestic and professional. Unlike the *mudra* movements and gestures of classical Indian dance forms, the sometimes complex hand movements in Iranian solo improvised dance are abstract. Miming is a basic aspect of women's domestic theater, *bāzī-hā-ye nemāyeshī*, but it is idiosyncratic rather than codified (Shay 1995b).

Thus a skilled individual dancer has at his or her disposal an almost unlimited repertoire of movements and formulas for movement that can be composed and recombined in a dazzling array; a truly creative dancer is able to give unique, excitingly fresh performances. In both public and private performances, an enormous variety and many combinations of movements and moods—serious, playful, sensual, joyful, graceful, ethereal—may be experienced.

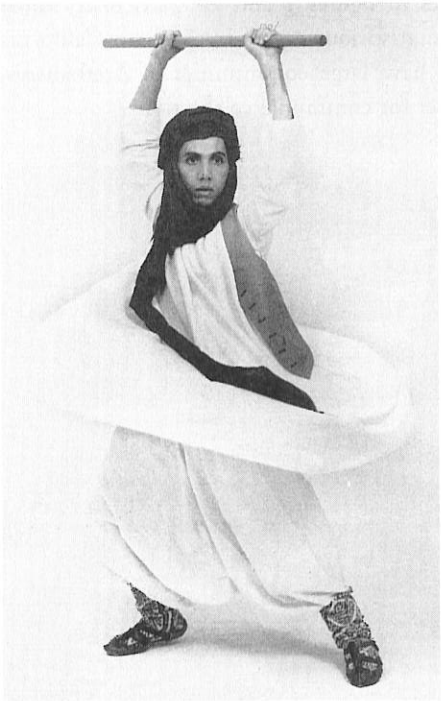

FIGURE 2 Gilberto Melendez of Avaz in *chūb-bāzī*, a stick dance from Khorasan Province, Iran. Avaz, Anthony Shay's International Dance Theatre; photo by Darren Young, 1995.

Both improvisation and geometry inform many genres of Iranian art (see Shay 1997), and the most important characteristics of this dance tradition are its connection with other performance practices through the use of improvisation and its connection with other visual forms through the use of geometric elements.

In performance, improvisation is a paramount feature of this dance form. Rarely do performers self-consciously consider their next movement, for dancing is as "natural" to the dancer as his or her native language; it is another form of culturally learned behavior. Also, a dancer rarely sustains the same movement for a prolonged period; rather, the movements flow from one to another with no perceptible boundary except, perhaps, for a brief, artful pose. Interestingly, this continous flow of movement, which exists in all the arts, is of special aesthetic value not only in dance and music but in visual arts such as calligraphy, rug-making, and ceramics. This intrinsic feature of "movement" is almost universally observed and remarked on by musicologists and art historians (see Farhat 1990; Hill and Grabar 1964; Pope 1964; Yūsofī 1994).

With regard to geometry, the movements in solo improvised dancing proceed from an aesthetic impulse intricately linked with and based on the geometric aesthetic that informs the visual arts in the Iranian-Islamic context and infuses the visual environment of this region. The geometric elements of the dance become most apparent in an accomplished performance in which the dancer's movements may be punctuated by effective pauses that create momentary poses—generally some interesting geometric form, such as turning to the side and curving both arms in an arc, with the hands placed near the head; or, alternatively, extending the arms and hands away from the

body in a linear figure extending from the shoulders, with the torso and head leaning away from the extended arms, creating a long diagonal.

Dancers may use wood, stone, or metal clappers or finger cymbals to accent the rhythmic patterns of the music. This practice is rarer today than it once was, but it is still common in stage presentations. Although other rhythms are present, the most popular meters for dance throughout the Iranian cultural sphere are 6/8 and 7/8, in several variations. A musical composition specifically suited to dance performances is called *reng*.

Solo improvised dancing is occasionally performed by more than one person at the same time. This is not really a contradiction in terms, because although several people are dancing—at a large party, for instance, a sizable group may dance simultaneously—each person performs mostly without reference to the others, and the movements are highly individual. This genre forms the basis for public stage performances that are no longer improvised but are fashioned into routines or choreography set and performed in unison by the dancers.

REFERENCES

And, Metin. 1959. *Dances of Anatolian Turkey*. New York: Dance Perspectives.

Bezā'ī, Bahrām. 1965. *Nemāyesh dar Īrān* (Theater in Iran). Tehran: Keivān.

De Warren, Robert, and Peter Williams. 1973. "Discovery in Persia." *Dance and Dancers* 24 (January):28–32.

Farhat, Hormoz. 1990. *The Dastgāh Concept in Persian Music*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Hamada, Geoffrey Mark. 1978. "Dance and Islam: The Bojnurdi Kurds of Northeastern Iran." M.A. thesis, University of California, Los Angeles.

Hasanov, Kamal. 1988. *Azərbaycan qədim folklor rəqsləri* (Folk Dances of Old Azerbaijan). Baku: Işıg.

Hill, Derek, and Oleg Grabar. 1964. *Islamic Architecture and Its Decoration*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Hourani, Albert. 1991. *History of the Arab Peoples*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press.

La Meri [Russell Merriweather Hughes]. 1961. "Learning the Danse du Ventre." *Dance Perspectives* 10:43–47.

Lisitsian, Srbui. 1958–1972. *Starinnye pliaski i teatrl'nye presdtavleniia armanskogo naroda* (Ancient Dance and Theater Performance of the Armenian Nation). 2 vols. Yerevan: Armenian Academy of Sciences.

Pope, Arthur Upham, et al. 1964–1965. "Calligraphy: An Outline History." In *A Survey of Persian Art*, ed. Arthur Upham Pope et al., Vol. 4:1707–1742. Costa Mesa, Calif.: Mazda.

Rezvani, Medjid. 1962. *Le théâtre et la danse en Iran*. Paris: Maisonneuve et Larose.

Shay, Anthony. 1995a. "Dance and Non-Dance: Patterned Movement in Iran and Islam." *Iranian Studies* 28:61–78.

———. 1995b. "*Bazi-ha-ye namayeshi*: Iranian Women's Theatrical Plays." *Dance Research Journal* 27(2):16–24.

———. 1997. "Choreophobia: Iranian Solo Improvised Dance as Transgressive and Potentially 'Out-of-Control' Behavior in the Southern California Diaspora." Ph.D. dissertation, University of California, Riverside.

———. 1999. *Choreophobia: Solo Improvised Dance in the Iranian World*. Costa Mesa, Calif.: Mazda.

St. John, Katherine. 1988. "Afghan Atan." *Viltis* 47(1):23–24.

———. 1989. "Afghan Dance." *Folk Dance Scene* 24(2):8–18.

———. 1993. "Cultural and Historical Study of Selected Women's Dance from Herat, Afghanistan, 1970–1980." M.A. thesis, Brigham Young University, Provo, Utah.

Yūsofī, Gholam Hosein. 1994. "Calligraphy." *Encyclopaedia Iranica*, 680–718. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul.

Zokā', Yahyā. 1978–1979. "Tārīkh-e raqs dar Īrān" (A History of Dance in Iran). *Honar va Mardom* 16(188):2–12; 16(189):2–7; 16(191): 39–41; 16(192):22–28.